

Nebraska: 1988 NCAA Team Champions

By Chuck Green
Senior Reporter

Most teams would be pleased with finishing No. 2 in the nation three seasons in a row, but not the Nebraska men's gymnastics team.

The Cornhuskers ended their three-year status of runner-up Friday night by setting a NCAA scoring record of 288.15 to capture the national title before 4,744 fans at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

The previous scoring record of 287.80 was set by Nebraska in 1983.

Illinois finished second with a score of 287.15, and UCLA generated 285.15 points to take third place.

The championship was the sixth for Nebraska since 1979. The meet marked the sixth time the NCAA Men's Championships have been held in Lincoln.

Nebraska coach Francis Allen said he had nearly forgotten what it felt like to win a national championship.

"It's a feeling that doesn't come around too often," he said. "But it's a nice feeling."

Illinois coach Yoshi Hayasaki said he was proud of the way his team fought back during the championships and the way the Fighting Illini have performed this season.

"I have great praise for this team," he said. "They did a great job from the beginning all the way to the end. We made a run all the way through to the end."

Illinois has been ranked No. 1 throughout the season.

Nebraska advanced to Friday's team finals by finishing first in the 10-team preliminary competition Thursday night. The Huskers totaled 286.65 Thursday to edge out Illinois and UCLA. Illinois scored 285.70 and the Bruins posted a mark of 285.25.

In Friday's competition, Nebraska's performers combined for a 48.35 in the floor exercise and never trailed after that on their way to the title.

Nebraska was led by Patrick Kirksey's 9.80 and Bob Stelter's 9.75 in the floor exercise.

In the pommel horse, Nebraska's Kevin Davis scored a 9.90 to lead the Huskers to a team score of 48.40, their highest event score of the night.

Davis said he was determined to do everything he could to keep Nebraska from finishing second for a fourth consecutive year.

"It's like doing your homework," he said. "We prepared to win it. It's incentive, but it did wear on me. It pushed me harder. The team stuck together because everyone knew how bad the other wanted it. The unity and support brought it together."

Nebraska won the still rings competition with a 48.15 and the parallel bars with a 47.85. Tom Schlesinger, who won the Nissen Award — college gymnastics' highest honor — last Wednesday, scored a 9.80 in the event.

Illinois edged the Huskers 47.85-47.30 in the vault competition. Stelter scored a 9.70 in the event to lead Nebraska.

UCLA won the high-bar competition with a score of 48.50.

The Bruins and the Huskers tied with a score of 47.85 in the parallel bars competition.

"I thought we won the match all the way through," Allen said. "The really hard-core gymnasts came out and knocked out the floor (exercise). And after the floor, we figured that they had pretty much handled the pressure."

"After that, it was pretty much downhill."

In addition to the national scoring record,

Nebraska set school records in the floor exercise (48.35), the pommel horse (48.40) and the still rings (47.60) during the three-day meet.

Allen said he didn't expect a new scoring record.

"But that's OK," he said. "A good team would have won the meet, but they set a national scoring record. That makes them better than (former Huskers) Jim Hartung, Scott Johnson and Phil Cahoy."

Allen said this year's team might be the best ever at Nebraska.

During the four sessions of the meet, 14,075 fans attended the competition. The largest single-session crowd was the 4,797 at Saturday night's individual finals.

Allen said the crowd played a major role in Nebraska's title.

"If we'd let up, we'd gotten beat," he said. "I was impressed with Illinois, and UCLA is an extremely talented team. The crowd helped us, the crowd made us."

Hayasaki said Nebraska's fans affected the judges' throughout the meet.

"I don't know whether Nebraska could've beaten Illinois (without the crowd), but I certainly felt there was an advantage (for Nebraska) with the crowd," Hayasaki said. "But the judges are experienced, and we just have to think they did their job."

UCLA coach Art Shurlock also thought the crowd affected his team's performance.

"It's very hard to counteract the enthusiasm of the Nebraska crowd," he said. "The judges were really responding to the crowd, but Nebraska did an excellent job."

"We didn't have the impact of a crowd at all. At least Illinois had a little bit of an audience."

Shurlock said the NCAA Championships should always be held at a neutral site.

"It's not going to happen next year," he said, "but maybe in the future it will be."

The championships are tentatively scheduled to return to Lincoln next year.

Hayasaki said he isn't enthusiastic to return to Lincoln again next season, but not because he didn't enjoy the hospitality.

"When you face Nebraska here, Nebraska is tough," he said. "This is great support. We're going to have to make sure than when we come here next year that we are a better team than they are."



Home crowd helps Huskers claim title

By Lori Griffin
Staff Reporter

A home crowd, which eventually totaled 14,075 during four sessions, helped the Nebraska men's gymnastics team win the NCAA title Friday night at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

Nebraska sophomore Mark Warburton said the crowds that packed the sports center during the three-day event helped because the Cornhuskers have enthusiastic fans. He said Friday night's crowd of 4,744 enabled the gymnasts to stay emotionally charged for the meet and for winning the team championship.

UCLA coach Art Shurlock said the crowd aided Nebraska's performances. He said the judging, along with a strong Nebraska team,

enabled the Huskers to win the team title with a national-record 288.15 points.

Illinois finished second with 287.80 points, while UCLA, the defending national champion, finished third with 285.15.

Illinois coach Yoshi Hayasaki said the crowd advantage helped the Huskers defeat the Fighting Illini.

"I would say so (that it affected the scoring)," Hayasaki said. "I don't know whether Nebraska could have beaten Illinois... but certainly I felt there was an advantage with the crowd."

Junior Mark Schiefelbein said the Nebraska fans helped in all aspects of the NCAA meet.

Schiefelbein said the impact of the crowd was felt when Warburton completed his parallel bar routine in the individual event finals Saturday night. He said the Nebraska fans know gymnastics and acknowledge when a gymnast does something well.

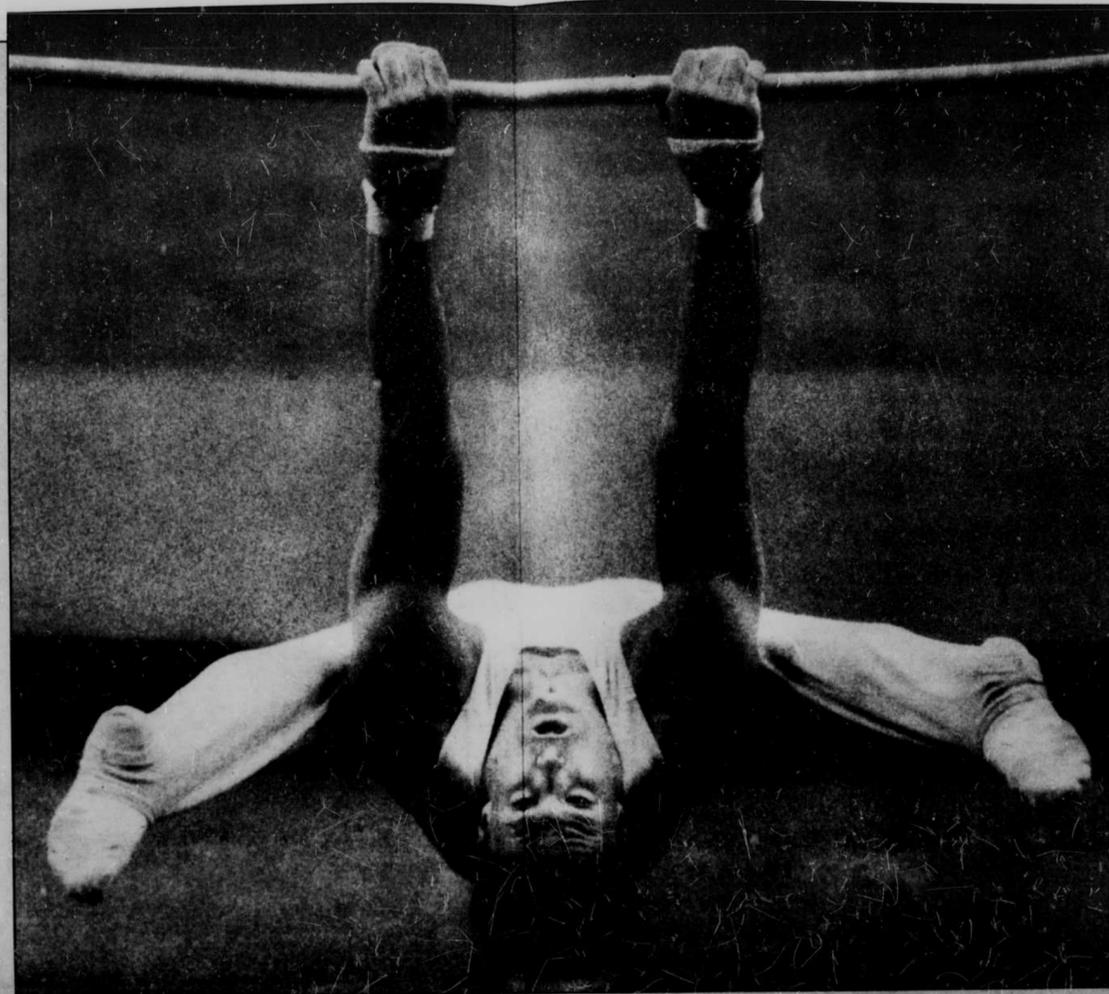
Schiefelbein said the crowd influenced the judging. He said Husker fans are not afraid to boo a bad score and that could help the judges in making final decisions.

"It can make the judges think twice about putting up a bad score," Schiefelbein said.

Nebraska student assistant Neil Palmer said the judges overlooked the crowd reaction. He said the Huskers performed their best and came out on top.

Palmer said the only discrepancy in the judging was in the individual scoring. He said although the judges had some problems with consistency, the average scores remained the same.

"The judges came from all over the country and I feel they picked a winning team correctly," Palmer said.



Clockwise from bottom left: Nebraska's Tom Schlesinger performs on the still rings. Kevin Davis of Nebraska performs on the high bar. Davis competes in the vault.

Houston Baptist, UNL dominate men's all-around

By Chuck Green
Senior Reporter

Gymnasts from Houston Baptist University and Nebraska dominated the all-around performances Friday night at the Bob Devaney Sports Center.

Miguel Rubio and Alfonso Rodriguez from Houston Baptist finished as the top two performers in the all-around, while Nebraska's Kevin Davis and Tom Schlesinger finished third and fourth.

Schlesinger was the defending 1987 all-around champion.

The top 24 all-arounders from Thursday night's optional competition competed Saturday with 1988 Olympic compulsory exercises. Scores from Thursday night's optionals were combined with Saturday's scores to determine the all-around champions.

Rubio's combined score of 114.15 was enough to power the sophomore from Barcelona, Spain, past his teammate and fellow countryman.

Rodriguez, a sophomore from Madrid, totaled 113.75 in the six events.

"It's a magic moment for us," said Houston Baptist coach Robert Dvorak. "They were perfect. With the exception of a couple of mistakes by Alfonso on the high bar, they were both outstanding."

Davis scored 113 and Schlesinger 112.50.

Rubio and Rodriguez held the top spots after Thursday night's competition. Davis finished the optional competition in fourth place with a score of 57.90, and Schlesinger was tied for sixth with Oklahoma's Mark Steeves with a 57.30.

Davis said that after Saturday's competition was half over, he knew there was too much ground to make up to beat Rubio and Rodriguez.

"They were just awesome this weekend," Davis said. "They had a good lead after the optionals and they did good in the compulsories, too. I made up some ground after the first three events. The vault is where I should have made up some ground, but I had a bad landing."

That bad landing gave Davis a score of 8.70. Rubio scored an 8.95 and Rodriguez earned an 8.90.

"I don't know if it would've given me the lead, but it would have made it a lot closer," Davis said.

Schlesinger said the team finals competition Friday night didn't affect him and Davis during the all-around competition.

"We were a little bit tired, but once you get out there and get the adrenaline flowing, we were all right," Schlesinger said.

Heading into the high-bar competition — the afternoon's final event — the all-around championship was still in doubt. Rodriguez led with a combined score of 104.55, but Rubio trailed by one-tenth of a point.

"He had to go last, and that high-bar routine isn't easy," Dvorak said. "I think Alfonso played it a little conservative, and that may have cost him a couple of tenths (of a point)."

Rodriguez had already scored a 9.20 in the event. Rubio's mark of 9.70 gave him the title and ensured a one-two finish for Houston Baptist.

ist in the all-around competition. "We are always like that," Rodriguez said. "One-two, two-one, it doesn't matter."

The top eight performers in each event from Thursday night competed for individual titles Saturday night. Five Cornhuskers earned seven top-six finishes in the six events, earning them All-America status.

Davis and Schlesinger finished fourth and fifth in the still rings with scores of 9.675 and 9.65. Paul O'Neil of New Mexico won the event with a 9.80. It was his second consecutive title in the event.

"I thank God because not everyone has the ability to come back, let alone win," O'Neil said. "I hope I can come back and win it again this year."

Bob Stelter finished eighth in the rings with a score of 9.525.

In the vault, Stelter finished fifth with a 9.5375, while teammate Patrick Kirksey finished No. 6 with a 9.50. The event was won for the third year in a row by New Mexico's Chad Fox, who scored a 9.7125.

"I had a lot of pressure because I wanted to win three in a row," Fox said. "That part feels awesome."

Fox was disappointed in his performance on the floor exercise, which he won last year. Fox finished tied with Chris McKee of Illinois for second in the event with a 9.85.

"I didn't deserve to win (the floor exercise) tonight, but I know I'm capable of winning it," Fox said. "I'll be back on the floor next year."

Davis and Mark Warburton gave Nebraska a one-two finish in the parallel bars. Davis scored a 9.90 to capture the title, and Warburton earned a 9.80.

Davis had tied Schlesinger for the 1987 parallel-bars championship. He said it was great to win the title outright this year, "but I'd tie with my own teammate anytime."

Davis said national team and individual championships were the best way he could think of to finish his career at Nebraska.

"I couldn't have done it any better," Davis said.

Kirksey finished No. 9 on the parallel bars with an 8.45.

On the high bar, Schlesinger was edged by Rubio and Iowa's Jeff Dow and finished third with a 9.875. Rubio said the high-bar title was "icing on the cake" after winning the all-around championship earlier Saturday.

"I didn't expect to win the all-around, only to be in the top three," Rubio said. "I was first in the (high-bar) rankings, but the finals were so good. It was luck."

Davis gave Nebraska its only other top-10 finish with a 9.10 on the pommel horse. The score was good enough for a ninth-place finish. Rodriguez and Penn State's Mark Sohn won the event with 9.80 scores.

Temple's Chris Wyatt won the floor exercise with a 9.90. Wyatt said he appreciated the support the fans at Nebraska gave him during the three-day meet.

"I have to thank God and the people back home that supported me," he said. "And the people of Nebraska really made me feel welcome here. That really helps."

Photos and Layout by Doug Carroll